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# The Impact of Experiential Learning in Enhancing Palliative Care Knowledge and Skills among Nurses

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### Background:

Nurses working in community settings are increasingly required to care for people with chronic, life limiting conditions. Innovative educational programs are required to ensure nurses are equipped to deal with this challenging area of practice.

### Aim:

The Program of Experience in the Palliative Approach (PEPA) started in 2003 as an initiative of the Australian Government, Department of Health and Ageing. The overall aim of PEPA is to improve the quality, availability and access to palliative care for people who are dying, and their families, by improving the skills and expertise of health practitioners, and enhancing collaboration between primary and specialist palliative care services. PEPA provides nurses with an opportunity to develop knowledge and skills in the palliative approach to care through funded clinical workforce placements or workshops.

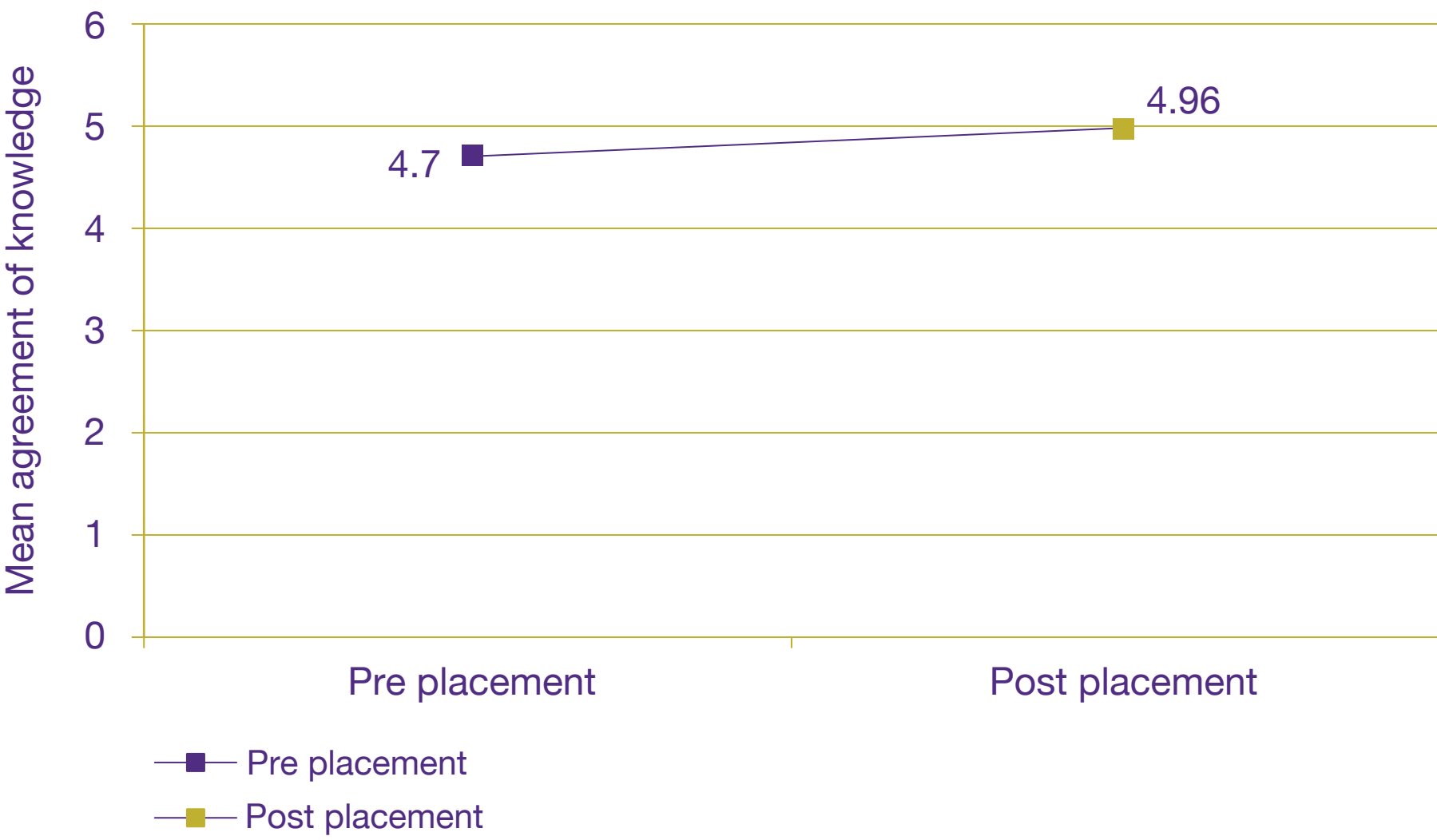
### Method:

From 2003 to 2006 a total of 410 nurses in Australia had undertaken PEPA clinical placements. Participating nurses were surveyed using questionnaires before and three months after their placement to evaluate the impact of the program on knowledge, confidence and practice.

### Results:

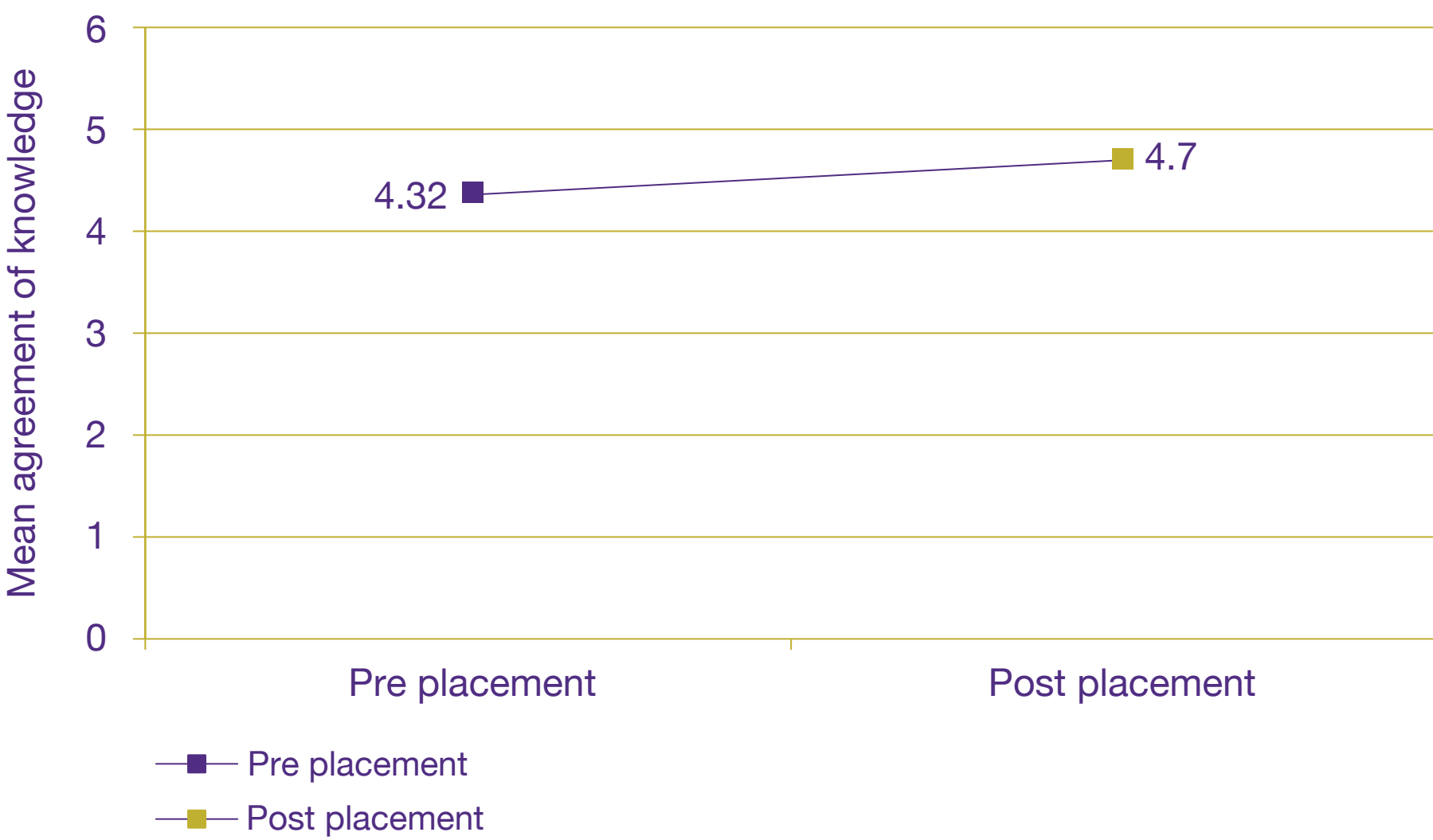
A total of 253 nurses completed both pre and post questionnaires. Responses to all items reflected improvements in knowledge, skills and practices following the PEPA placement. Nurses who responded to the evaluation survey reported an increased knowledge of the palliative approach to care, with mean score on a 6 point scale (1=strongly disagree to 6=strongly agree) increasing from 4.70 (SD=0.89) pre-placement to 4.96 (SD=0.93) post-placement as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Understanding the principals of the palliative approach to care



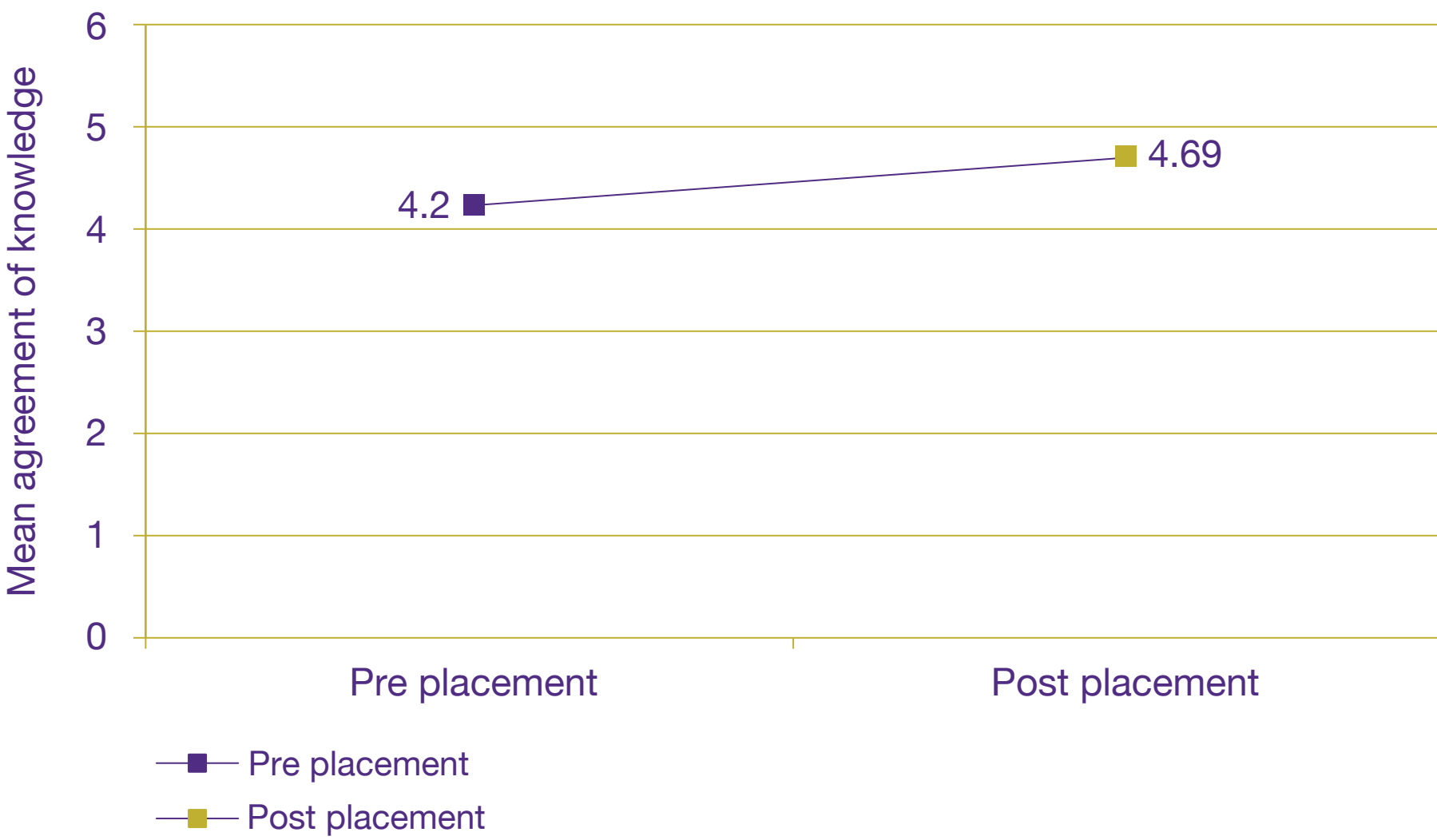
Nurses also reported more confidence in identifying needs of people with a life-limiting illness, with mean score on a scale from 1=strongly disagree to 6=strongly agree increasing from 4.30 (SD=0.97) pre-placement to 4.70 (SD=1.11) post-placement as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Confidence in identifying needs



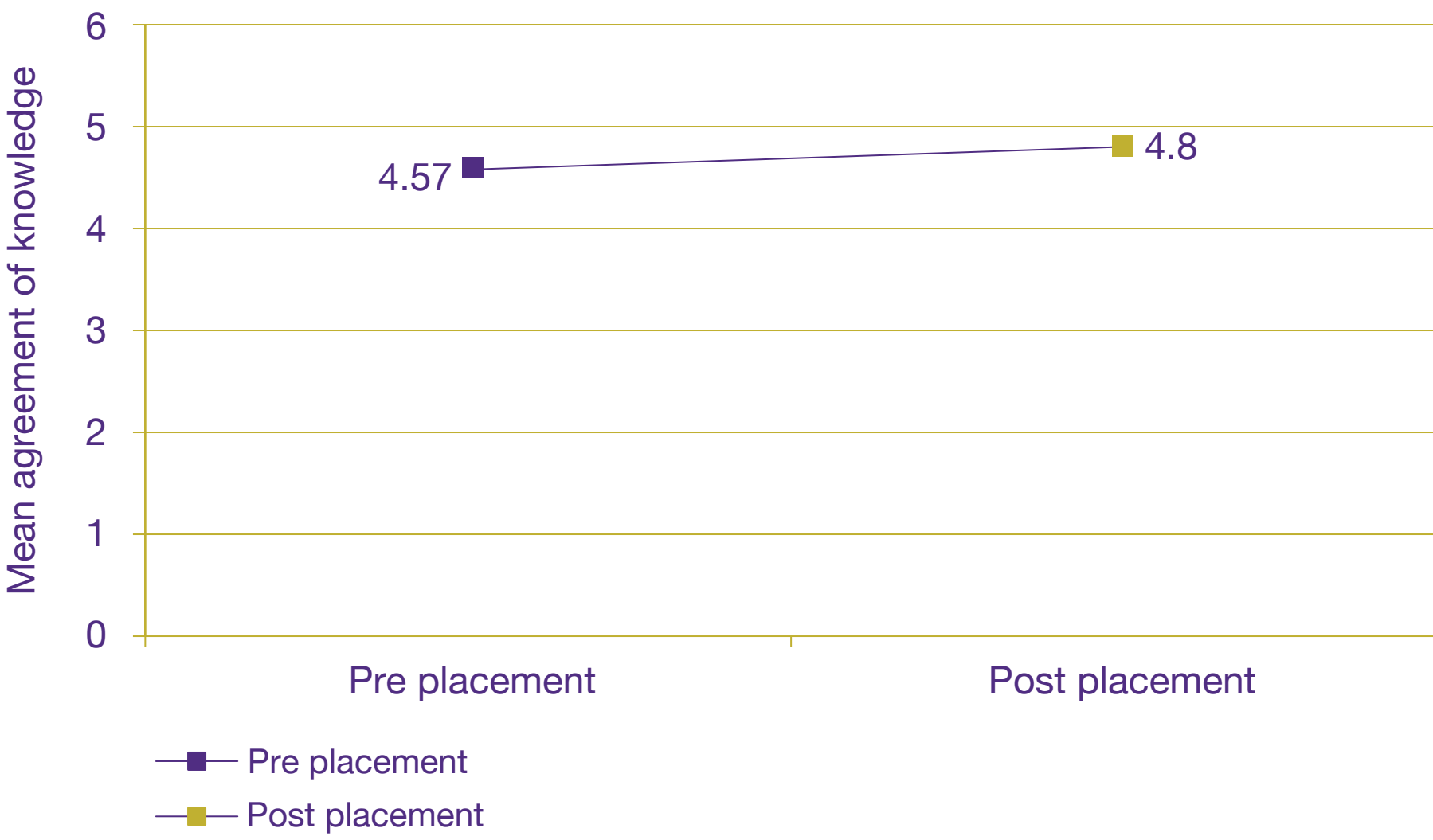
The survey data also indicated that nurses were more confident in implementing interventions for people with a life-limiting illness with mean scores on a scale ranging from 1=strongly disagree to 6=strongly agree increasing from 4.20 (SD=0.91) pre-placement to 4.69 (SD=1.13) post-placement as show in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Ability to implement interventions



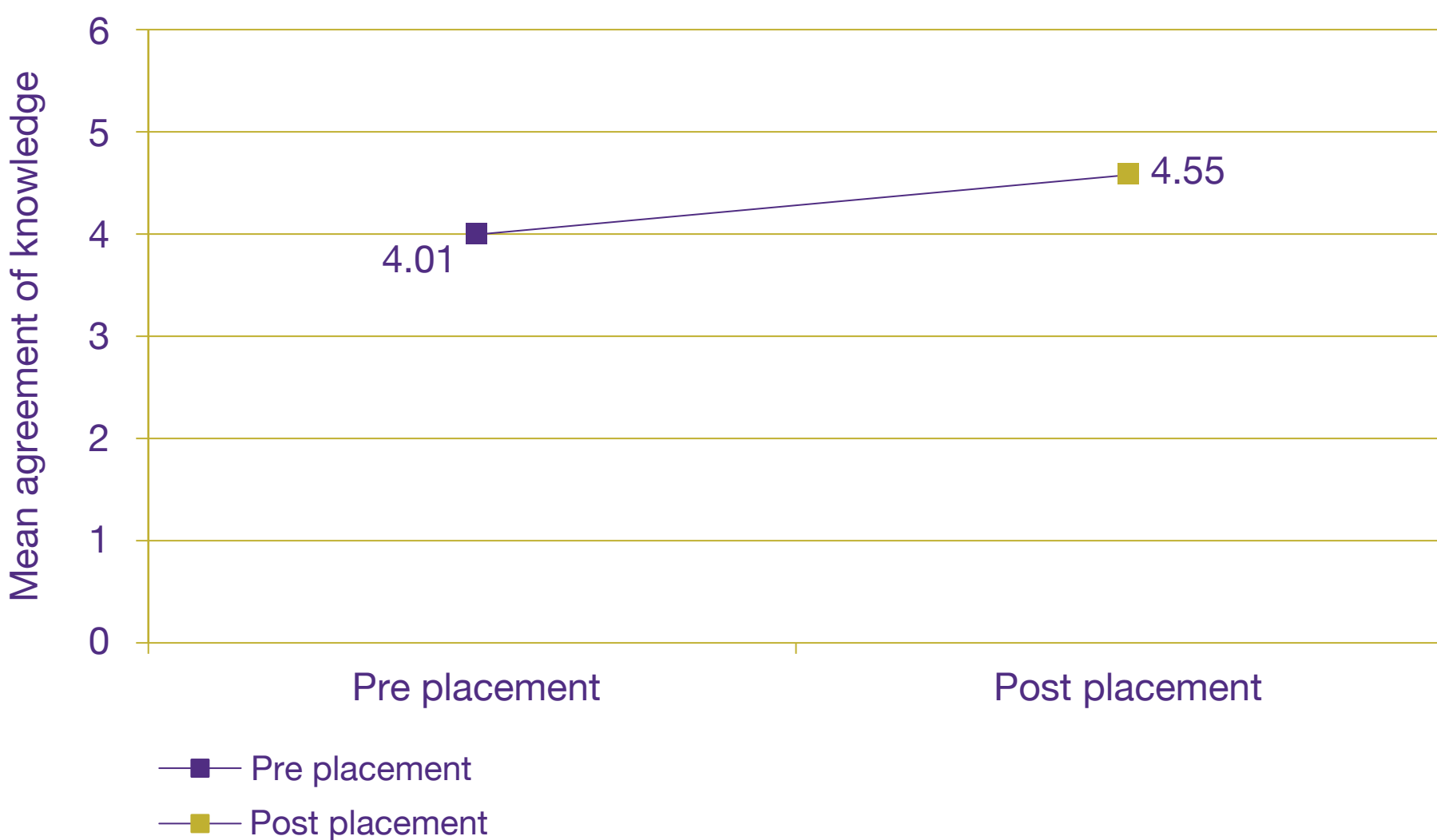
After the PEPA placement nurses had a better understanding of their role in supporting people who have a life limiting illness with mean scores on a scale ranging from 1=strongly disagree to 6=strongly agree increasing from 4.57 (SD=0.92) pre-placement to 4.80 (SD=0.96) post-placement as shown in Figure 4 .

Figure 4: Understanding the role of my discipline



Nurses were more confident in discussing end of life issues with people with a life-limiting illness and their families after their placement. The mean scores on a scale ranging from 1=strongly disagree to 6=strongly agree increased from 4.01 (SD=1.09) pre-placement to 4.55 (SD=1.30) post-placement as shown in Figure 5.

Figure 5: Confident when discussing end of life issues



Nurses reported various practice changes that had an influence on the care of people with a life limiting illness. The activities include the following:

Activities:

- Improved patient care
- Better pain management in patients
- Providing evidence based treatment plans
- Implementation of revised guidelines
- Improved advocacy for patients
- Better referral procedures
- Integration of palliative approach to care into routine care practices
- Better symptom management
- Liaising with specialist palliative care practitioners in relation to patient needs.

### Conclusion:

Overall the data indicates that PEPA participant’s knowledge and confidence in the palliative approach to care has improved. Nurses were proactive in implementing practice changes in their workplace and were in a better position to provide competent care after the PEPA placement. Based on the results it could be concluded that the PEPA program is an effective strategy that provides nurses the opportunity to increase their knowledge, skills and experience in palliative care. Therefore, it is vital that such programs be sustained so that it can provide nurses the necessary skills to provide better patient care in a palliative care setting.

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